

Usama Alshaibi from the book *Hope Dies Last* by Studs Terkel

He is a sound engineer at the Chicago Historical Society, as well as an independent filmmaker. He is thirty-two years old. He had been sworn in as an American citizen a few days before this conversation.

Throughout my whole childhood, it was from school to school, country to country, language to language, learning Arabic one year, English the next, then Arabic, then English. I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1969. My father is Iraqi, my mother Palestinian.

My father went to the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, working on his Ph.D. in business administration on a scholarship he received from the Iraqi government. I didn't speak any English; I was just at kindergarten age. I ended up adapting to an American sensibility by the time I was in third grade. That's when we went back to Iraq. A lot of families from the Middle East will come to the United States, study, and return home. My father was going to teach and practice what he learned here.

We had a nice house in Baghdad. I have a lot of fond memories of sitting on my grandfather's lap. He was a tall man. He had many daughters. One of them was my mother. My grandfather was Palestinian; he was very proud of that.[1] School was very tough because I had forgotten all my Arabic. We lived in Baghdad for roughly a year. Then we moved to southern Iraq, to a town on the sea called Basra, very close to the Gulf, very close to Iran. During this time, I was in fourth grade. My sisters and I had to have a tutor help us at home, but we were very happy. My parents bought a house, and I had a dog. Then the war started, the Iran-Iraq War. I remember hearing the sirens. When I was a kid, I would always go out in the street to watch the ambulances. But this siren never got closer. It just went on and on and on, this droning sound.

I remember my father came rushing in with all this food. I said, "What's going on?" He said, "We're in a war now." That night was the first time I experienced the bombing, where the ground would literally shake. They would turn off the electricity every night. That's when I started to fear for my life, to think I was going to die. I was probably eleven. I started to not believe my parents anymore. I would rush to the bathroom to try to take cover. We all had to sleep in my parents' bedroom because it was on the first floor. Life suddenly got very, very hard. Eventually we ended up leaving.

My father got a job in Saudi Arabia. My mother decided to take all us kids back to Basra to try to sell the house, and then things just got worse. They wouldn't let anyone out of the country. All of a sudden, my father was in Saudi Arabia, and we were stuck in the south of Iraq. I remember that because the regime of Saddam Hussein was becoming so fascist that they were watching everybody.[2] To discuss the war over the telephone my parents would use the metaphor. They would say, "Our aunt, she's becoming more and more ill. I don't think our aunt is going to make it." That's how they communicated. We had to escape. Finally my mom says we're gonna go to Kuwait, which is south of Iraq. They were not letting anyone out of the country. My mother hid all her jewelry inside the diapers of my younger sister.[3] I remember my mom said, "If the guards, the soldiers, ask you anything, just say 'I don't know.'" She was afraid that they would trick me into admitting where we were going. We took a bus to the border. I remember seeing

tanks, remember seeing the desert. I remember the soldiers with guns. They took me aside, away from my mom, and they said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I don't know." They said, "Are you leaving Iraq?" I said, "I don't know." They said, "Are you a dumb kid?" I said, "I don't know." So they laughed at me. My younger sister was crying so much they let us go. My mom swore she was going for medical reasons and would return in a week. We never came back. Months later, half of our house was bombed. [4]

I didn't understand politics at the time. I became very fearful of war. In Saudi Arabia—it's a very religious country—I was going to an all-boys school. I was constantly terrified of nuclear war. I became very religious. Every night I would pray to God not to allow World War Three to happen. That thought consumed me. I was suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. I would sit in class and hear planes overhead and I would want to duck. My heart would race.

The thing that I missed the most when I left Iraq was my dog. We had to leave him. I would cry every night for my dog, but really, I was crying, I think, for a lot of things. I felt safe in Saudi Arabia, but I was dealing with something else, which is religion. I was going to a very strict Muslim school, where I would have to memorize ten to twenty pages of the Koran. If you screwed up a word or two, you would be beaten on your hand. Eventually, my parents lost everything, so we returned to the United States, [5] and all of a sudden I was in seventh grade. It was very hard for me to relate to my peers after what I had been through. I pretended I was coming from a very neutral experience. I would have to say I was embarrassed about being an Arab or from the Middle East. [6]

I remember once in global studies in seventh grade in Iowa City, the teacher made me stand up in front of the whole class and tell everyone where I was from and what it was like. When you're in seventh grade, it's such an awkward age. You don't want to stand out, you want to fit in. I was very shy, just trying to be like everyone else. Not until years later have I become more open in discussing, and very proud of who I am.

My father tried getting work in the United States. We ended up returning to the Middle East. We lived in Jordan. We lived in the United Arab Emirates. Finally, my father bought a house in Iowa City. We were going back and forth, very nomadic. I finished high school in America.

I stopped trying to fit in so much and found a more political and artistic crowd. We had kids from different countries. We had some Jewish kids that hung out with us. The majority of our high school was all white. I would stand out in a class just because my skin was a little dark, or my name was unusual.

Then things didn't work out with my parents and they got divorced. I took off. By the time I was eighteen, I had become even more nomadic, just traveling around the United States, working here, going to school there. I ended up back in Iowa City, and my immigration status ran out. Then the Gulf War started. I had no visa, no right to work in this country. I was working under the table at these very low-paying jobs.

[Sighs] It was a scary time. When people would ask me where I'm from, I would say Jordan, not Iraq. I would go out to bars and overhear people saying things about how we gotta kill all the

sand niggers. People can't really look at me and tell where I'm from or who I am. It's kind of like I was a voyeur. I was a part of this culture, but I was quiet, because I was afraid.

This was a very scary time. I had no visa. I had no status. I had to go to Omaha, Nebraska, hire a lawyer, and fight to be in this country. My father, who was working in the United Arab Emirates, was contacted by the Iraqi army. They wanted me for the draft, and this country wanted me out! I was twenty years old. I went in front of a judge and fought my case, stating that if I returned to my country, I would die. I got political asylum. Thank God. I will always be thankful for this country because they gave me political asylum to stay here.

Eventually I got my green card, and more of my family from Iraq and the Middle East have emigrated here. A lot of them had to escape or bribe people to get out. They wouldn't let my grandfather out of Iraq. Keep in mind, he was from Palestine, left in 1948, during the exodus, and ended up in Iraq. Here is a man who has been kicked out of his own country, placed in another country, not even his, and he's not allowed to leave. They say he died of a broken heart. He gave me my name. Usama was a great Islamic warrior. It means "son of a lion." [7]

Saddam is a bastard. What he's done to his people, what he's done to Iraq...but our interest over there is questionable. It was a very paranoid time for me. As an Arab, I felt my status here was shaky. I never felt grounded anywhere. My family tried to make a home in Iraq; that didn't work. They tried to make a home here in the United States; that didn't work.

After the divorce, our family just disintegrated. I had no sense of home or place. I felt vulnerable. I felt I had to be quiet. After I got my green card, however, I started to be more outspoken. I started to read more, to find out what's really going on. I became active in politics, to try to end the sanctions against Iraq, to be outspoken about what's happening in Palestine and Israel. When 9/11 happened, I wasn't surprised. Already Osama bin Laden had been doing things. The tension with Israel and Palestine was getting worse. I started getting death threats over the Internet: "Die, sand nigger." Anonymous.

There was this great ignorance in this country. Everyone kept on saying, "They're envious because of our freedom, because of our democracy." I said, "No, it has nothing to do with that." "Our country did nothing wrong, our country doesn't deserve this." Of course nobody deserves this, but let's not play innocent, let's not pretend that a million dead Iraqi babies, dead from the UN sanctions against Iraqi citizens, don't go unnoticed in the Middle East. A lot of people that I had developed bonds with through the Internet turned against me. I had anonymous death threats saying, "Go back to your land, we're going to bomb the Middle East and turn it into a gas pump."

I was very worried because the government took three thousand men and put them in detention centers. They weren't officially charged. There was this great paranoia. I really didn't know what was going to happen. I wouldn't be surprised right now if they grabbed me and just started asking me a bunch of questions. Who knows? During the [first] Gulf War, my mother was contacted by the FBI and interviewed. I was being very vocal on the Internet. I started hearing politicians saying, "Just stop anyone with a diaper and a belt on his head." I was hearing people say, "Let's just nuke all of the Middle East and let God sort them out." It felt like Here we go

again. And then I got paranoid. My sisters were saying, “You should be careful with what you say. They can take your words and they could...” I said, “What do you mean, my words? All of a sudden, my words have become dangerous?” They said, “Well, you’re not a citizen.” [Whispers] “You’re right.” So again, I was quiet. Because if anything happens, they can put any case against me, they can ship us all out tomorrow. So I waited patiently, made sure I got my citizenship. I remember, I was sitting in court the day of your birthday, and the judge gave this impassioned speech. He said, “This country is a country of immigrants. We all came from somewhere else. It is your duty to speak out about your culture, about your race, about who you are.” This was the judge. It was a really great speech. I’m sitting with people from a hundred and three countries. I’m getting my citizenship. It’s like graduating. I just remember feeling, OK, I belong somewhere. I’m Arab, I’m American, and I’m on a mission.

My mission is to give voices to people who have been really afraid to talk. I think there’s a great silence among a lot of Arabs and Arab Americans in this country. There’s a lot of fear in this. I don’t know how many times I hear people on the radio and the TV news talk about the Islamists. It’s given an ominous meaning.

I got married to an American girl, and I got my citizenship. Kristie grew up Christian.[8] We’re both not religious. For me, it’s actually easier to discuss politics when I keep religion out of it. The Koran is filled with contradictions and all sorts of stories. Al-Qaeda, bin Laden, all these guys, they don’t represent us. They don’t represent the religion, they don’t represent our community. I think sometimes of what happened to the Japanese after Pearl Harbor. I hope from this tragedy that there is an interest in what other people feel, instead of having anger and this lust for revenge.

I have hope that my generation of Arabs that grew up here can bridge the gap and incorporate our culture into this country without having to sacrifice our values and our sense of who we are. I think it’s a great country: freedom of religion, freedom of speech. These are the things that I’m defending. Civil liberties. When I see people screened for racial profiling, I say, “If you keep letting this happen, eventually it will come back to you.” How much of your rights are you willing to sacrifice for “safety”?

I’m thirty-two years old. For the first time, I feel like I belong somewhere. It’s here.